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## Asbestos test results in forest prompts Kootenai to publish brochure

By Brad Fuqua, The Western News

In the Kootenai National Forest area that surrounds the former W.R. Grace mine, studies have proven the existence of asbestos fibers in tree bark and ground duff.

With the region so popular among recreationists, especially hunters, Libby District Ranger Malcolm Edwards felt that it was only proper to let visitors know more about the presence of asbestos. As a result, Kootenai National Forest has produced a brochure outlining facts, identifying the main area of concern and offering precautions to take while in the vicinity.

"It got to the point where we had an obligation to let people know what's out there on the forest," Edwards said. "There are no regulations or prohibitions other than the mine itself, which is private property."

The brochure includes a general, short history on the asbestos-contaminated vermiculite that was mined in the area and associated health risks.

"Results are showing that tree bark and duff are a reservoir for asbestos particles," the brochure reads. "The fibers are notably present in ground duff and bark in the area defined by the map ... Fibers have been detected on the forest as far as eight miles from the mine."

Research and recommendations for the area to be defined on the brochure originated with data from the Environmental Protection Agency and studies done through Montana Tech. The information for the brochure was revised three times before printed.

"We're working with the EPA and Montana Tech in drawing that line," Edwards said. "It was drawn in consultation with the EPA. They did review our brochure."

Edwards calls the line "fuzzy" – in that it's not like someone could be completely safe if a few feet out of the identified circle of concern.

"This whole thing will evolve as the information comes in," Edwards said. "Our whole goal is to make our employees and the public and other agencies aware."

Edwards said the forest does not want to simply abandon the area. Instead, they are in the process of figuring out what management activities could possibly take place – for example, thinning, timber sales or road maintenance.

"We're meeting next week with Montana Tech and some of our aviation people to look at further simulations in that area," Edwards said. "If you do certain activities, how much of the fibers do you expose?"

While admitting that much is unknown, the brochure offers some suggested measures that one can take to help protect themselves. For example, there are precautions for camping, hunting and caring for game. Cutting firewood and building a fire should also be done with caution.

"Fire is a major concern in there. If you have a column of smoke, are there fibers in there and what's the exposure on the ground," Edwards said.

The brochure recommends that if cutting firewood, the activity should be done when the woods are damp. Trees with no bark should be chosen and bark should be left behind in the forest. People should wear coveralls or other protective clothing that can be removed and stowed away from the passenger area of the vehicle. And washing of clothing is advisable.

Building a fire is also another concern area with various pointers offered from the Forest Service. The brochure says that using a private camp stove and fuel reduces exposure to tree bark dust and ashes. And for those who want to build a fire with wood, they are advised to use dead and down fuels without bark, or bring clean wood in from other locations.

The brochure is available at U.S. Forest Service locations.